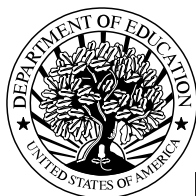


# WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE

Providing evidence. Improving education.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

DECEMBER 2003



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## OVERVIEW OF THE WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE

### What is the What Works Clearinghouse?

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) was established in 2002 by the [U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences](#) to provide educators, researchers, policymakers, and the public with a central, independent, and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. It is administered by the Department through a contract to a joint venture of the American Institutes for Research and the Campbell Collaboration.

Through a set of accessible databases and user-friendly reports, the WWC provides education consumers with ongoing, high-quality reviews of the effectiveness of replicable educational interventions (programs, practices, products, and policies) that promise to improve student outcomes.

### Why is the What Works Clearinghouse important?

The current nationwide emphasis on ensuring that all students and schools meet high standards has increased the demand for evidence of “what works” in education. Currently, few resources exist to help education decision makers differentiate high-quality research from weaker research and promotional claims. As a decision-making tool, the What Works Clearinghouse helps the education community locate and recognize credible and reliable evidence to make informed decisions.

### What topic areas are initially being explored?

The following seven initial topic areas were chosen through a systematic process that included public review (please see FAQ on [How does the What Works Clearinghouse define “topic area”?](#)):

- Interventions for Beginning Reading
  - Interventions for students who are having difficulty reading
  - Interventions for general beginning reading students
- Curriculum-Based Interventions for Increasing K–12 Math Achievement
  - Middle school
  - Elementary school
  - High school
- Programs for Preventing High School Dropout
- Programs for Increasing Adult Literacy
- Peer-Assisted Learning in Elementary Schools: Reading, Mathematics, and Science Gains

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- Interventions to Reduce Delinquent, Disorderly, and Violent Behavior in Middle and High Schools
  - Interventions for Elementary School English Language Learners: Increasing English Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement

## **WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE: DEFINITIONS, STANDARDS, AND REVIEW PROCESS**

### **How does the What Works Clearinghouse define “intervention”?**

Interventions are programs (for example, Accelerated Schools), practices (for example, mixed-age grouping), products (for example, a textbook or a particular curriculum) and policies (for example, class size reduction) that can be adopted by multiple schools and districts.

### **How does the What Works Clearinghouse define “topic area”?**

A topic area is defined by the intended outcome (for example, improving literacy skills), the intended population (for example, elementary school students from low-income backgrounds), and the types of interventions (for example, particular programs or practices) that may produce the intended outcome for that population.

### **What are WWC Reports?**

There are three types of WWC Reports:

- **Study Report:** A Study Report will provide a review of an individual outcomes study on a particular intervention. For example, a Study Report would review one study conducted on “Reading Program X.” This report will provide an abstract of the study, the ratings given to the study when it was reviewed using WWC standards, a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the study, and a summary of the findings broken out by subpopulations if that information is reported in the study. If copyright permission is available, the Study Report will provide a link to the full text of the study.
- **Intervention Report:** An Intervention Report will provide findings on all available evidence for each study that focuses on a particular intervention. For example, an Intervention Report would provide findings on all studies reviewed for “Reading Program X.” This report provides a brief description of the intervention (i.e., program, practice, policy, or product) and, if available, contact information for the developer. It will provide a brief description of each outcomes study on this intervention that meets the WWC standards, including the strengths and weaknesses, and the findings of the study. If there are enough similar studies, the Intervention Report synthesizes the findings across studies as well. The Intervention Report will provide a link to all related Study Reports.

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- **Topic Report:** A Topic Report will present a synopsis of findings for all interventions pertaining to a particular topic area. For example, a Topic Report would include all interventions relevant to the topic area, such as “Interventions for Beginning Reading.” This report will briefly describe the topic area and each intervention that the WWC reviewed in that topic area and notes the strength of the research on the effects of each intervention. The Topic Report will provide a link to all related Intervention Reports.

These reports will be nested: the WWC reviews and reports only on outcomes studies for interventions. The WWC reviews and reports only on interventions that are relevant to its topic areas.

## **What is the Technical Advisory Group?**

The WWC **Technical Advisory Group (TAG)** is a major intellectual resource and peer review body for the WWC. The TAG helps establish and validate the standards for reviewing research, monitors and informs the methodological aspects of the evidence reviews, reviews and suggests improvements to WWC Reports, and recommends the inclusion of WWC Reports in the WWC databases.

## **What standards has the What Works Clearinghouse developed for reviewing scientific evidence?**

In June 2003, the WWC **Technical Advisory Group (TAG)** recommended the following WWC guiding standards to review evidence: the **Study Design and Implementation Assessment Device (Study DIAD)** and the **Cumulative Research Evidence Assessment Device (CREAD)**. Before being finalized, the standards underwent an extensive review process, including public comment and revision. The overall process to establish the current standards, which included extensive public comment, took more than a year.

The first set of standards, the Study DIAD, is used to review the characteristics of effective studies and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each study’s methodology. The Study DIAD identifies studies that are methodologically sound enough to be included in a report on the effects of a specific intervention.

The second set of standards, the CREAD, is applied to the group of studies that meet the Study DIAD standards to assess the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn from the research on a specific intervention.

A third set of standards for reviewing test instruments will be developed in 2004.

## **How does the What Works Clearinghouse conduct reviews of evidence?**

Each WWC topic area involves a work plan; a **team** composed of a Senior Content Advisor, a Project Coordinator, a Methodology Coordinator, and analysts; and protocols that tailor the Study Design and Implementation Assessment Device (Study DIAD) and the Cumulative Research Evidence Assessment Device (CREAD) to the subject of each review.

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- Once a topic area is identified, relevant studies are gathered by an extensive search of published and unpublished research literature, including submissions from intervention developers and the public.
  - Each study found to be relevant to a WWC topic area undergoes a rigorous review process that follows established WWC procedures. Studies are screened for relevance and design. Those that meet WWC standards are reviewed using a coding guide based on the Study DIAD. A WWC Study Report is then released if it meets the standards (see FAQ on [What are WWC Reports?](#)). In response to the urgent demand for evidence of what is working in education, individual study reports are placed on a fast track for early release to the public. This modification in the original work plan provides the public with reviews of individual studies as soon as they are completed.
  - All studies that meet WWC standards will be included in an Intervention Report (please see FAQ on [What are WWC Reports?](#)). The CREAD is used to evaluate the strengths of the body of evidence for that intervention. Again, those reports will be released as soon as they are completed. A Topic Report is then developed to briefly summarize evidence of the effectiveness of various interventions that are relevant to a particular topic area.

Quality control is built into every stage of the review process. All reports undergo extensive review, including the following (actual reviews differ for study versus intervention and topic reports): fact checking, review by the study author, review by the intervention developer, review by the WWC Steering Committee, review by a panel of anonymous peer reviewers, and review by the Technical Advisory Group (TAG). The U.S. Department of Education reviews the final reports to ensure that the WWC has followed the pre-established processes and adhered to its own high standards.

When reports are completed and approved, they will be released through the WWC website. Users will be able to search the WWC databases for Study, Intervention, and Topic Reports. New and updated reports will be posted online monthly. *WWCUpdate*, the WWC’s electronic news alert, and the “What’s New” section of the WWC website will list new releases.

## **What types of research designs “count” as evidence in What Works Clearinghouse reviews?**

The appropriate design for scientifically based research depends on the question being asked. The WWC focuses on the question of what works to improve student outcomes, or in other words, what has a *causal effect* on student outcomes. In research that focuses on causal effects, experimental research designs provide the strongest evidence of what works, followed by certain types of quasi-experimental research designs. Other forms of research are more appropriate for other purposes, such as to generate hypotheses or to understand the process through which change happens.

Experimental designs, commonly called randomized control trials when conducted in real-world settings, randomly place students, classes, or schools into groups that do or do not participate in an intervention. This type of design is strong because, if done well, it greatly reduces the chance that systematic differences between the intervention group and the control group exist. For example, if students are randomly assigned to one of two groups, then the average ability level of students in the first group is expected to be equal to the average ability level of students in the second group. Therefore, any subsequent group differences in achievement could not be attributed to pre-existing

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differences between the groups. Strong quasi-experimental designs place students, classes, or schools into groups that do or do not participate in the intervention and control for any initial differences between the groups. If the researchers account for all important differences between the groups, then the design is strong. However, there is always the danger that the research might miss a key difference between the groups that affects outcomes. The WWC's review of evidence focuses on randomized control trials and includes high-quality quasi-experimental research designs as well.

## **How does the What Works Clearinghouse identify topic areas for WWC Reports?**

To identify topic areas, the WWC seeks input from those who might use the WWC reports. Specifically, the WWC solicits nominations:

- on the [WWC website](#);
- at WWC public meetings and presentations;
- through the What Works Network (WWN), a core group of constituents that includes various organizations representing educators, policymakers, researchers, technical assistance providers, and the community;
- through interviews with stakeholders, such as practitioners, senior members of education associations, policy-making organizations, and staff of the U.S. Department of Education;
- through reviews of policies and acts, such as the No Child Left Behind Act; and
- through reviews of existing research.

The WWC is continuously seeking nominations for future topic areas. The list of initial topic areas currently being reviewed is available on the [WWC website](#). Once new topic areas have been identified, the WWC will solicit and search for relevant studies (both published and unpublished), including studies conducted by program and product developers.

## **How does the What Works Clearinghouse ensure that the topic areas are important and useful areas for study?**

In choosing topic areas, the What Works Clearinghouse assesses several factors, including:

- the potential of programs or practices in the topic area to improve student outcomes;
- the perceived demand within the education community for evidence of effective educational interventions in the topic area; and
- the likely availability of high-quality scientific studies of effective educational interventions in the topic area.



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## WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE: SERVICES AND PRODUCTS

### What products and services offered by the What Works Clearinghouse are available to the education community?

The WWC has several products and services available:

- The WWC has produced two sets of standards to help users interested in using rigorous standards to consider evidence of effects. The **Study Design and Implementation Device (Study DIAD)** identifies the strengths and weaknesses of an individual outcome study's methodology. The **Cumulative Research Evidence Assessment Device (CREAD)** reports the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn from a body of outcomes research on a specific educational intervention.
- **WWC Reports** will provide evidence of the effectiveness of educational interventions. The review process for WWC Reports is thorough, scientific, and objective. Each step of the process—gathering research literature, reviewing individual studies, and synthesizing the results of reviews—is guided by scientific standards developed by the WWC and leading experts in the field. The WWC reporting process will consist of a three-tiered, ongoing system of reports (study, intervention, and topic level):
  - A **Study Report** will provide a review of an individual outcomes study on a particular intervention. For example, a Study Report would review one study conducted on “Reading Program X.”
  - An **Intervention Report** will provide findings on all available evidence for each study that focuses on a particular intervention. For example, an Intervention Report would provide findings on all studies gathered on “Reading Program X.”
  - A **Topic Report** will present a synopsis of findings for all interventions for a particular topic area. For example, a Topic Report would include all interventions relevant to a topic, such as “Interventions for Beginning Reading.”

These findings will provide practitioners and policymakers with useful information for determining whether a particular program, practice, product, or policy under consideration is likely to meet the needs of districts, schools, and students.

- The **Registry of Outcome Evaluators** will provide information about evaluators who have submitted their qualifications to conduct research on the effects of replicable educational interventions. This database can be used by schools, districts, and educational program and product developers to identify potential evaluators to conduct studies on educational outcomes.
- **Collaboration with an extensive network of organizations** representing educators, policymakers, parents, community leaders, researchers, foundations, media, and technical assistance providers, as well as program and product developers, is central to the WWC. The WWC seeks input from all those interested in improving the nature and role of evidence in education and is committed to ensuring that its products and services meet

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users' needs. The WWC engages the public directly by soliciting input and providing current information through the WWC website, email updates, scheduled public presentations, and published summaries and updates. In addition, the What Works Network, an informal communications network of national organizations that represent key education constituencies, has been formed to help guide the WWC's operation, provide support for WWC goals and activities, and encourage the use of WWC products and services.

- **Communication of findings** of WWC Reports occurs through the WWC databases. These free, searchable, user-friendly databases and reports will be available on February 3, 2004. Information is also shared through presentations, publications, electronic bulletins, and other media. To ensure that this information is widely available, the WWC works closely with an extensive network that represents various education organizations and the public.

## **How and when will I be able to access What Works Clearinghouse services?**

The WWC website provides the latest information about the project. All WWC services will be accessible through this website. The WWC's schedule of upcoming products and activities provides an overview of the plans and progress of the WWC, including information about standards, topic areas, WWC Reports (study, intervention, and topic), and registries. WWC Reports will be available free of charge on the website through user-friendly databases.

To ensure the quality of the WWC's methodology and procedures, they are currently being pilot tested, including focus groups with end users. The WWC wants to ensure that the information and the way it is presented meet the needs of the education community. Ultimately, this addition to the delivery system will provide a stronger end product for education consumers. The first WWC Study Reports will be released to the public on February 3, 2004.

## **What is the sequence for release of What Works Clearinghouse Reports?**

Topic areas will be reviewed in waves. In the first wave, the WWC is pilot testing the procedures and reports pertaining to two topic areas: 1) Curriculum-Based Interventions for Increasing Middle School Math Achievement and 2) Peer-Assisted Learning in Elementary School. In the second wave, the WWC will focus on two more topic areas: 1) Programs for Preventing High School Dropout and 2) Interventions for Elementary School English Language Learners. WWC Reports in these topic areas will be released according to the following revised schedule:

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## WWC Reports Release Schedule

Topic Area	Study Reports 1st Released	Intervention Reports 1st Released	Topic Reports Released
Curriculum-Based Interventions for Increasing Middle School Math Achievement	February 3, 2004	April 2004	May–June 2004
Peer-Assisted Learning in Elementary Schools	February 3, 2004	April 2004	May 2004
Programs for Preventing High School Dropout	June 2004	August 2004	October 2004
Interventions for Elementary School English Language Learners	June 2004	August 2004	October 2004

New studies in these topic areas will be released on an ongoing basis. An expanded schedule, covering all topic areas, will be posted in early 2004.

### Why should I be confident that the What Works Clearinghouse Reports are thorough, scientific, and objective?

The WWC Reports are grounded in scientific rigor, which is ensured throughout the entire process by:

- following scientific standards for gathering the research literature and reviewing individual studies and bodies of research;
- defining topic-specific research characteristics in consultation with an expert in the topic area who does not have a pre-existing relationship with a particular intervention;
- providing an opportunity for researchers who conducted the original study to review the Study Report;
- providing an opportunity for the intervention developer to review the Intervention Report;
- establishing an independent Technical Advisory Group (TAG), experts in research design, program evaluation, and research synthesis, both within and outside the field of education, who consult on and approve each WWC Intervention and Topic Report;
- requiring an independent review of each WWC Intervention and Topic Report by the chair of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and by an anonymous peer review team consisting of experts in the methodology and topic area; and
- making all the definitions, standards, processes, methods, timelines, and studies used in the WWC Reports transparent and accessible to the public.

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## How does the What Works Clearinghouse ensure that individuals do not misinterpret or misuse its research review standards?

There is no real guarantee that WWC findings will not be misused or misinterpreted by others. The WWC makes a concerted effort to address any misunderstandings and distortions through the WWC website and other public means.

The WWC does not endorse programs, practices, or products. Rather, the WWC evaluates the quality of existing evidence of the effectiveness of educational interventions. This message is articulated in all WWC published materials and WWC Reports.

To further clarify its role, the WWC clearly states that if an evaluation study gets favorable results from the Study Design and Implementation Device (Study DIAD), or if a body of studies gets a favorable review, it does not mean that the WWC “approves” or “endorses” the intervention being studied. It simply means that the study or studies on a particular intervention were designed and implemented in a way that allows the WWC to have some confidence in the results.

Consistent with the WWC’s transparent approach, all standards, research tools, and ratings are available publicly on the website. The WWC will characterize all of its findings, pointing out the value and limitations of the evidence produced to support the education community in making well-informed decisions regarding educational interventions. Distinctions and rating systems will be defined in the WWC Reports themselves, on its website, and in its print publications.

## REGISTRY OF OUTCOME EVALUATORS

### What types of information will be in the Registry of Outcome Evaluators?

The Registry of Outcome Evaluators is an online database of information about evaluators (individuals or organizations) who conduct research on the effects of replicable educational interventions and test instruments. This resource is designed to help schools and districts as well as educational program and product developers select evaluators to conduct studies on educational outcomes. All submissions will be included in the registry if the evaluator provides the following information:

- **Identifying data:** the name and address of the individual or organization, including electronic contact information;
- **Services:** a list of services offered by the individual or organization, such as designing and conducting randomized control trials or quasi-experimental evaluation studies;
- **Skills and experience:** the level of experience for each service offered by the individual or organization (or individuals within the organization), including details about the scope, recentness, and project topics as well as relevant credentials;
- **Examples, references, and reports:** examples of recent, relevant work, including contact information for project sponsors and examples of public reports, journal articles, and books related to these examples; and

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- **Ethical and practice commitments:** a signed commitment to conduct studies that conform to What Works Clearinghouse research standards and to ethical practice and professional standards.

In addition to this information, the Registry of Outcome Evaluators will include a users' guide to help consumers assess the qualifications of an evaluator and select an evaluator to best meet their needs. Please note that the WWC does not assess the quality of an evaluator's work, nor does it endorse any evaluator. The Registry of Outcome Evaluators will be available in Winter 2004.

## **How can I be listed in the Registry of Outcome Evaluators?**

By Winter 2004, the WWC website will provide forms for individual and organizational evaluators to submit required information for inclusion in the Registry of Outcome Evaluators. Evaluators wishing to be notified of this posting should sign up to receive *WWCUpdate*, the WWC's electronic news alert.

## **HOW THE EDUCATION COMMUNITY CAN BE INVOLVED**

### **How can I nominate future topic areas or interventions for a WWC Topic or Intervention Report?**

If you would like to nominate a topic area, program, or a product, including your own, for review, go to <http://w-w-c.org/topicnom.html>.

### **How can I nominate a study for consideration for a WWC Study Report?**

If you would like to nominate a study on a particular intervention for consideration, visit <http://w-w-c.org/b6.html>.

### **How can I learn more about the What Works Clearinghouse?**

You can learn about the WWC in various ways:

- **Continue to visit the [WWC website](#).** The WWC website provides an overview of the goals and activities of the WWC; a description of the Technical Advisory Group, which guides the development of WWC Reports; a schedule of WWC events and presentations; and more. The website is continually updated to provide the latest information about the WWC to the public. An updated WWC site will be launched on February 3, 2004.
- **Sign up to receive [WWCUpdate](#).** Sign up through the WWC website to receive *WWCUpdate*, periodic electronic updates on the activities, plans, and products of the WWC.

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- **Attend a WWC presentation.** Numerous presentations featuring the WWC are being held across the country. WWC presentations provide an overview of the WWC and its goals and activities, updates on the latest reports issued, and a forum for discussing your questions or concerns with WWC staff. A list of upcoming presentations is available on the WWC website. If you, or your organization, are interested in having the WWC make a presentation, please contact Becky Powell, Communications Specialist for the What Works Clearinghouse, at [rpowell@air.org](mailto:rpowell@air.org).
  - **Look for the latest information about WWC findings and activities in newsletters, listservs, magazines, journals, and newspapers.** The WWC has a proactive approach to sharing evidence of educational effectiveness. To ensure broad access to WWC findings, updates and summaries of findings will be published in education and general publications that reach a broad spectrum of readers. If you would like to have WWC findings featured in a specific publication, send an email to [wwcinfo@w-w-c.org](mailto:wwcinfo@w-w-c.org) with your suggestion.
  - **Learn how you or your organization can become a member of the What Works Network (WWN).** The What Works Network is a core group of constituents that includes a variety of organizations representing educators, policymakers, researchers, community leaders, parents, and technical assistance providers. The WWC continues to collaborate with the WWN to ensure that our processes and products are meeting the needs of consumers. The WWN plays a critical role in transmitting the WWC findings to various constituencies. To learn more about how your organization can play a critical role, send an e-mail to [wwcinfo@w-w-c.org](mailto:wwcinfo@w-w-c.org)
  - **Contact the WWC staff.** If you have comments or questions, send an email to [wwcinfo@w-w-c.org](mailto:wwcinfo@w-w-c.org). Your email will be directed to the appropriate WWC staff person. You can also call or write to the WWC at:

What Works Clearinghouse  
2277 Research Boulevard, MS 6M  
Rockville, MD 20850  
1-866-WWC-9799